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ABSTRACT

The relationship between long-term youth unemployment and family relationships and that between youth unemployment and courtship and marriage patterns were examined in a study conducted in two towns in South Wales. Thirty-seven young men and 26 young women between the ages of 18 and 25 who had been unemployed for 6 months or longer were interviewed. Also interviewed were 28 fathers, 36 mothers, and 10 persons who were either siblings or partners of the unemployed young adults. Those interviewed were from working class or lower middle class backgrounds. The differences between the ways in which unemployment affected the family relationships of males and females turned out to be less than expected. This is largely because notions, if not actual practices, of sexual equality seemed to exist in most of the families interviewed. Outside the household of origin, however, the study findings were closer to those existing in the literature. More unemployed young men spent time interacting outside the home with their peer groups than did the unemployed women. Thus, the women were more likely to be centered on the home and correspondingly more isolated. While the men's social networks tended to be based on friendships, often long-standing, with persons near their home, the women tended to socialize with other women from work. Thus, long-term unemployment was more likely to rob the women of social contacts than it was the men. Unemployment placed economic constrictions on dating and seemed to be linked to deferring marriage. Sometimes, unemployment seemed to encourage unemployed individuals into steady relationships since these cost less than extensive dating. (MN)

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Gender relations, family relations and long-term youth unemployment

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This paper discusses research findings deriving from an investigation of family relationships and youth unemployment in two South Wales towns, Swansea and Port Talbot; fieldwork took place between March 1985 and November 1986. Following a six month pilot project funded by University College, Swansea, the research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust. Concerned in the main with young adults in the 18 to 25 year age group who had been unemployed for six months or longer, interviews were carried out in three locations, two working-class and one lower middle-class: a large public housing estate in Port Talbot, a public housing estate in a 'respectable', very desirable area of west Swansea, and a broad tract of private, owner-occupied housing in west Swansea. A total of fifty-eight households were involved in the study: thirty-seven young men, twenty-six young women, twenty-eight fathers and thirty-six mothers were interviewed. A further ten young people - partners or siblings - were formally interviewed and we also had informal discussions with a number of parents. The reason for the smaller number of unemployed young women is largely because, in reflection of local labour-market conditions, it proved difficult to find them in sufficient numbers, particularly in the private housing area. Although the interview was given structure by a formal schedule, the questions were largely open-ended and the conduct of the interview encouraged respondents to digress and follow their own line of conversation. The material gathered is, therefore, quasi-ethnographic, in keeping with the general qualitative orientation of the researchers.

The project was concerned to explore, inter alia, the following questions. What are the effects of long-term youth unemployment upon relationships within the family of origin? Does the long-term unemployment of young people have implications for their courtship

activities and marriage patterns? How do parents understand and explain the unemployment of their daughters and sons? Is chronic youth unemployment preventing or obstructing the passage of a large section of a generation into adulthood? What are the coping strategies which are evolved to cope with the situation?

In this paper we shall discuss these and other topics from a further perspective, looking at the role of gender in structuring the experience of unemployment for these young people and their families. The reader should not forget, in reading our discussion, that this is still very much 'work in progress'. Fieldwork only finished in November 1986 and we are still busy with the analysis of our data. What follows must, therefore, be regarded as tentative.

Gender and the transition from youth to adulthood

Of all the topics listed above, perhaps the one which most comprehensively sums up the range of issues with which we are concerned is 'the transition from youth to adulthood.' It is by now something of a commonplace observation to say that this transition is centrally structured by gender categories: boys grow up to be men, girls grow up to be women. It is more than this, however. The processes of achieving adulthood are, it is argued, different for young women and young men.

With respect to young men, it is the adult male wage which has been identified as the crucial criterion of 'becoming a man' (Jenkins,1983:80; Leonard,1980:71-5; Willis,1977:150; 1984:19). For young women, however, although employment is not insignificant, it is suggested by a number of studies that the primary social criterion of adulthood is marriage (Griffin, 1985:50; Lees,1986:91-5; Leonard,1980:259-60). Once again,

however, there is more to it than this. In the first place, one of the main - if not the main - reasons it is important for the young male to assume adult waged status is because it makes it possible to support a wife and family - a taken for granted aspect of the adult male role portfolio - and thereby obtain access to female domestic labour outside his parental home. Second, for women, marriage is seen to be bound up - for similar reasons, to do with raising a family - with access to a male wage, preferably a full (adult) male wage. Thus, in the social construction of 'normal' male and female adulthood, marriage and the adult wage are one bound up with the other for both young women and young men, albeit with differing emphases.

Following this line of argument, it seems likely that the advent of chronic high levels of youth unemployment may have implications for the transition from youth to adulthood. Such an argument has, indeed, been advanced recently by Paul Willis, who has identified the problem of 'broken transitions':

> '...most of the adult unemployed are already culturally formed as people, as women, as men, as fathers, mothers, householders, as consumers... But for young adults the situation is qualitatively different... This is because they are not yet fully formed. For them there are only broken transitions into the possibilities of adult roles. They have never experienced them. They are in suspended animation... Properly to understand unemployment we need to understand what is missing - the wage... the wage is still the golden key (mortgage, rent, household bills) to a personal household separate from parents... No wage is no keys to the future.'
>
> (Willis, 1984:19)

For Willis, therefore, mass youth unemployment is condemning a substantial proportion of the present generation of young people to 'suspended animation', a limbo of the life course, something different from adolescence but less than adulthood.

Leaving this interpretation of the situation aside for the moment - we shall return to it in our conclusions - it should be clear that, whether Willis is right or wrong, the absence of paid employment is likely to have different implications for young men than for young women. One of the clearest discussions of this topic comes from Claire Wallace (1986;forthcoming). For the young men in her study of the Isle of Sheppey (England), there was the possibility of a retreat into the compensatory 'macho' status of the street-corner peer group. For the young women, however, being unemployed implied more staying within the family home, which meant 'a form of extended adolescence' (1986:109), particularly embodied in greater participation in housework. One is reminded here of Barbara Hudson's argument that, 'young girls' attempts to be accepted as "young women" are always liable to be undermined (subverted) by perceptions of them as childish, immature or any other of the terms by which we define the status "adolescent"' (1984:31-2). The alternative for the young women of Sheppey was to found a household of their own. Since marriage was still predicated upon access to at least one wage for these young people, this tended to result in higher levels of unmarried cohabitation and pregnancy. There may be a consequent trend towards later marriage. Although they should not be pushed too far, the comparison with urban ghetto populations in the US is suggestive (Aschenbrenner,1975; Anderson,1976; Hannerz,1969; Liebow,1967; Rainwater,1971; Stack,1974). In the context of the arguments put forward by Willis and Wallace, we shall now discuss in a summary fashion some of the results from our study in South Wales.

Relationships within the family and the household

We commenced the research with the somewhat conventional expectation that gender would prove to be one of the most important variables structuring the lives of young people and their parents: 'commonplace relations, experiences and representations of youth are quite crucially related to questions of the masculine and the femine' (McRobbie and Nava,1984:ix). And, in one sense, this remains our view. However, what is interesting, it seems to us, is our perception of gender relations as not uniformly important in all situations. The important questions then become; which gender relations, how important, and in what contexts?

Within the family of origin, for example, we were suprised to find that in many important respects it was the similarity in the parents' treatment of young women and young men which was most striking. Both were seen to have similar kinds of needs etc., and were discussed in largely similar terms by their mothers or fathers. Notions of gender equality - and we stress, notions, not actual practices - were apparently current in many of the households we visited (cf.Lees,1986:86; Sharpe,1976). Inasmuch as we can tell at this stage of data analysis - and finer, more discriminatory analysis of the interview texts may yet yield a different interpretation - there are no major gender differences with respect to attitudes to money and its handling, to family conflict (whether as a result of unemployment or not) or to attitudes towards leaving home. Our findings with respect to conflict and leaving home may, of course, in part reflect the fact that in looking primarily at families where long-term unemployed young adults were still resident in the parental household, we are likely to have selected out those families experiencing the most severe conflict. As a consequence, we have probably missed those young women who,

if Chris Griffin's findings are representative (1985:48-9), leave home in the wake of violence or other forms of abuse, typically at the hands of their fathers.

Be that as it may, our experience is that, within the families we were looking at, it was attributed personality characteristics rather than gender stereotypes which were most influential in determining relations between parents and their young adult children. This, however, is not to say that gender was unimportant. For example, in general, daughters contribute more than their brothers to the domestic labour needs of the household; wives do immeasurably more than husbands. Housework remains the domain of women. However, what is at least as interesting - and in this we found exactly the situation which Diana Leonard documents for the Swansea of the late 1960s (1980:5-60) - is that young people, in fact, contribute very little indeed to housework, regardless of their gender. Not only is it is a woman's job, it is usually 'mam's': she looks after the house and those who live in it. As other authors have noted in other contexts, the unemployment of men (and, as our research illustrates, young people) does not appear to contribute much to a renegotiation of the domestic division of labour, notions of gender equality or not (Marsden and Duff, 1975:163-75; Morris,1985a).

The centrality of the mother's role within the household is apparent in two other respects. It is clear, for example, that the 'problem' of young unemployment, in all of its aspects - financial, psychological and emotional, or whatever - is very much one with which the mother copes. 'Dad' was often something of an enigma to us during the interview, a shadowy presence felt but not seen; women constituted the majority of the

parents to whom we had access. This, of course, is in large part no more than a reflection of the female responsibility for the primary 'woman's work' of child care. This extends, as Leonard has also made clear (1980:33-4), to the management and organisation of important life-course transitions such as marriage. However, it is also a function of the wife/mother's role in the management of domestic finances, on the one hand, and as the 'carer', on the other. A number of researchers have, for example, identified the important job which women do in managing their husband's unemployment (McKee and Bell,1985; Morris,1985b; Popay,1985).

The second aspect of the mother's familial role is related to, or is an aspect, of her identification as the 'carer'. In many families, there was conflict which may be described as severe; in many others there were less serious tensions, but tensions nonetheless. Only about a quarter of our families reported no conflict. This in itself is not particularly unusual in families with adolesecent or young adult members; unemployment certainly contributes to the severity of family conflict, we do not think it is likely to cause it. While we would not go as far as Barrett and McIntosh (1982), in describing the family as 'anti-social', it is our view that a degree of conflict - sometimes a considerable degree - within families is, in some senses, 'normal', only to be expected, and not to be interpreted as a deviation from a putative norm of happy domesticity. This is all the more so, if, as we suggested earlier, notions of gender equality are current at the level of day-to-day life within the families in question. The role of the mother in all of this is typically that of peacemaker or arbiter, generally in the context of the father's attempts to exert authority over his son(s) or daughter(s). It is often more complicated than this - particularly if relations between the parents are

strained as, in some of our households they were - but as a generalisation it holds good.

Peer groups and social networks

Within the family and the household, therefore, the significance of gender divisions for these young people was, perhaps, less than we had expected. That this is so, however, largely reflects the centrality of gender divisions within the parental generation with respect to the domestic division of labour. The young woman's (relative) freedom from housework, for example, is a function of its near total monopolisation by her mother. Gender and generation interact within the context of the family to produce a complicated hierarchy of obligation and duty, on the one hand, and indulgence, on the other. Furthermore, the apparent gender equality of the young woman within the household - relative to her male siblings - may be as much a function of her position in the life-course, as a reflection of notions about gender roles. The indulged, independent South Wales girl of 1987 may well, on becoming a mother, assume the role of domestic worker and psychological carer. She is also likely, in the present labour-market situation, to be a wage-earner and breadwinner.

Outside the household of origin, the matter becomes a little more straightforward. Our initial conclusions may be summarised as follows. First, in broad agreement with Claire Wallace's findings discussed earlier, more unemployed young men spend time interacting outside 'the house' with their peer groups than unemployed young women, who are more likely to be centred on the home and correspondingly more isolated. Impressionistic evidence from our samples suggests - and this is, indeed, what one might perhaps expect - that how much social isolation is experienced by how many young women, in the absence of employment varies from area to area, in reflection of differing patterns of

neighbourhood interaction and levels of female unemployment. This suggestion can only be confirmed, however, by further data analysis.

Our evidence also suggests that, while young men's social networks tend to be based on friendships, often long-standing, with 'mates' near home, young women often socialise and 'go out' with other women from work. These new contacts may replace old school-friends, who have drifted away with steady boy-friends or their own new work-mates. Groups of young women from the same office or shop having a night out together are often seen in Swansea and Port Talbot. Nor is the 'girls' night out' anything new. The difference in social networks between men and women in this respect explains, in large part, the greater social isolation of unemployed young women. Some responded to this isolation by depending heavily on one steady boy-friend; others just sat at home. Others, however, do manage to maintain their networks. Unemployment does not appear to rob young men of contact with their peers in the same way. They could still meet locally, even if their mates were in employment. If they could not afford beer, they could drink soft drinks. Also there are their unemployed mates - all in the same boat -with whom to hang around during the day.

Second, with respect to parental perceptions of their children's lives outside the home, there are also interesting differences with respect to gender. Young women - and here one can detect a major change since the late 1960s, when Leonard did her study - do not appear to be a major object of concern, and certainly not in respect of their sexual behaviour. By contrast, however, the greater part of parental concern focussed on sons, in articulation of the view that 'the Devil makes work for idle hands to do.' Clearly, in the eyes of parents in South Wales, the Devil's work

is more of a temptation for young men than young women. Some parents expressed particular concern that their sons would be seduced by an alternative life-style in which work was negatively valued, a 'dole culture' of 'sex and drugs and rock'n'roll.'

Courtship and marriage

Perhaps the major social project which links 'home' and 'outside' for young adults and their parents is courtship, leading eventually in most cases to marriage and the establishment of a new independent household. As we have already seen, the adult wage, particularly, perhaps the adult male wage, is seen to be one of the crucial pivots of this project. What then was the situation with respect to the unemployed young people in our study?

The baseline from which to start answering this question must be the perceptions of the people concerned with respect to the differing needs of young men and women in the process of courtship. The most commonly held view was that young men needed more money than young women in order to compete successfully in the courtship market. This, many respondents argued, is because it is expected that the male should foot most, if not all, of the bill for 'going out'. Not only that, but - and this is in reflection of the patterns of peer-group interaction outlined above - young men drank more and went out more with their mates. Where it was argued that young women had similar financial needs, this was explained with reference to the expenditure on clothes and cosmetics which is needed for 'going out' and attracting a boyfriend.

It is interesting to note a contradiction in our interview material with respect to expenditure. Many interviewees, both female and male,

expressed strongly the idea that there should be equality with respect to 'who paid'. A considerable number of these, however, then went on to talk about the problems experienced by young men because, in fact, it was expected that they should pay. 'Traditional' beliefs about appropriate gender roles exert a very real force in the process of courtship, stronger perhaps than in any other social arena which we looked at. The power of these traditional role models, however, is coupled with a recognition of change and uncertainty

Gender differences in patterns of leisure spending and consumption are related to the position of young women and young men in the labour market. Generally speaking, in the United Kingdom, women earn less than men of the same age, legislation such as the 1970 Equal Pay Act and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act notwithstanding (Dex,1985:112-142; Martin and Roberts,1984:43-59; Snell, Glucklich and Povall, 1981). If a young man is in employment, the extra financial burden created by the social expectations which we have described above can relatively easily be borne in the period before family responsibilities are acquired.

However, a young man who is unemployed - particularly if his unemployment persists for any length of time - is in a different, and difficult, situation. In the first place, he will simply have to subsist on a reduced income. This is a timely reminder that long-term unemployment is largely to do with money, if nothing else; living on state social security benefits means poverty or something close to it. This, of course, also applies to young women. In the second place, however, there are no gender disparities with respect to the incomes of unemployed young adults: unmarried women and men receive the same welfare benefits.

Gender equality with respect to social security entitlements for young single people has its perverse consequences, however. Some young men who we interviewed admitted that they felt themselves to be at something of an economic disadvantage in asking women out. This is all the more so when one considers that the main local venues for meeting the opposite sex in Swansea and Port Talbot are commercially-run discos. These all operate a cover-charge (although in some, women are admitted free before a certain time, or on certain nights) and drinks are more expensive than elsewhere. So, what is a young man to do?

One solution is the 'steady' girlfriend. Money is not so much of a problem in a relationship of this kind: much of the couple's time may be spent in one or other's home, a costless or cheap form of entertainment (renting a video film for viewing while baby-sitting is a viable alternative to going to the cinema, for example), and if they do 'go out' it is more acceptable for expenditure to be shared. There is still the problem, however, of securing a 'steady' girlfriend in the first place. A small number of young men in the sample tried a different way out of their predicament; they found themselves younger girlfriends, who were still at school. The latter may have lower expectations about their social life, or be more restricted by parental constraints with respect to courtship, to the degree that the boyfriend's expenditure will be reduced anyway. As such, it may well be a satisfactory coping strategy for some young men.

For others, however, meeting and courting girls of a similar age-group to themselves on anything more than a casual basis, was expensive, too expensive. Their plight is made more severe by the nature of the local opportunity structure. In both localities, female labour is

more in demand than male. In Swansea, the official unemployment rates (for January 1987) were 19.3 per cent for males and 9.3 per cent for females; the corresponding figures for Neath and Port Talbot, the comparable statistical area, were 15.5 and 11.2 per cent, respectively (Department of Employment, Office for Wales, Press Notice, 12 February 1987: 3, Table 5). Not only, therefore, are unemployed young men at a disadvantage in courtship with respect to their female peers, but young women are less likely to be unemployed anyway. There is thus the makings of a shift in the 'balance of power' in the courtship and marriage market. It is much too early to speculate about whether or not marriage patterns will change for this category of young men. However, referring once again to Claire Wallace's arguments (1986), the possibility of deferred marriage, or even no marriage at all, may be a real one. The same can be said about the possibility that an increased number of young women will set up - and continue in - independent households, with or without partners and children.

On comparing our material with Diana Leonard's impressive study (1980) of courtship and marriage in Swansea in the 'sixties, the difference is striking in some respects. Then, pre-marital sex appeared to be the exception, sons and daughters lived with their parents prior to marriage, cohabitation was unheard of, and marriage was inextricably bound up with the assumption of adulthood. Now, pre-marital sex is accepted, not only by young people but also by the majority of their parents, many young people leave home at some time or another, cohabitation is commonplace (if not yet a 'norm'), and for some marriage may be deferred; in the process it may also have become less bound up with notions of adulthood.

Some of these changes reflect the grim influences of unemployment. More to the point, however, is the importance of massive social change with respect to women's consciousness, the redefinition of gender roles with respect to employment and the family, the control by young women of their own fertility, and, more generally, attitudes towards sexuality and its expression. This, of course, is not to paint a picture of a revolution in gender equality achieved, but simply to say that some changes have occurred.

The transition to adulthood

Earlier in this paper we discussed Willis's argument that exclusion from paid employment results in a concomitant exclusion from adulthood. Other researchers have subsequently supported this interpretation of the situation (i.e. Bostyn and Wight,1987:142). Put succinctly, we disagree strongly with this view. Young people continue to develop into adults, long-term unemployment notwithstanding, and there are at least four reasons why this is the case.

In the first place, many attributes of adulthood are independent of the labour-market. Defined and bestowed by the state at different age-points, these include criminal responsibility, sexual consent, the right to marry, the right to vote, even the right to donate blood. Obligations are also involved: to register for National Insurance purposes, for example.

Second, social security benefit, while not as symbolically powerful as a 'proper wage', does allow young adults a greater degree of financial independence than they had at school. It is a resource of their own, which they can manage - well or badly - and thus exhibit - or not - a degree of adult responsibility. Claiming benefit is also an adult transaction between an individual and the state.

Third (and this is something we have discussed in detail elsewhere: Hutson and Jenkins, 1987a; 1987b), young people become adults at least in part because their parents help them to do so. Mothers and fathers, but particularly mothers, cajole, support, comfort, bully, constructively neglect and push their children into adulthood. People have to 'grow up'; parents recognise this and accept their role in contributing towards the process.

Finally, of course, most young people want (eventually) to 'grow up' - it is 'only natural'. For the majority of young women and men, experiencing the complicated cocktail of social, psychological and biological changes which constitute the life-course stage which we have, perhaps too glibly, called the 'transition from youth to adulthood', there is not much option. Even if they wanted to remain as children, there is not much that they can do, within the bounds of broad convention and socially accredited 'normality', to prevent the acquisition of some kind of adult status.

Gender, of course, does make a difference to all of this. In this paper, we have argued that young women and men, particularly if they are unemployed for a long period, move into adulthood in different ways. Such differences may, what is more, limit in important ways the scope of each category's adult claim on the world. It is, however, too early to say with any degree of certainty what the long-term consequences of chronic unemployment will be in this respect.

Finally, it may strike the reader as somewhat unusual that, in a paper presented to a conference devoted to education research, there has so far been no mention of either education or training. This is partly because we

have not yet got around to analysing our interview data relating to experiences of, and attitudes towards, schooling, training and state unemployment schemes. In closing, it may, however, be legitimate to ask whether the material presented in this paper has any implications for debates about education. We think it does, in two important respects.

In the first place, if we are even only partially correct in our analysis of the complex interaction between gender roles and long-term unemployment in the transition to adulthood - particularly with respect to courtship and marriage - then it may be realistic to suggest that the gendered 'balance of power' may be unstable at the moment, particularly in those areas and communities most afflicted by severe unemployment. The important point is this: not only are models of female identity changing, but what it means to be 'male' may also be in flux. This, it seems to us, is a powerful argument for working even harder than we do already to eliminate gender bias in the public and hidden curricula, of secondary education in particular. Both men and women are going to need a broader range of skills and potentials. School is one venue for their acquisition.

To say this is to look on the bright side. The darker side of our findings and arguments is the harsh reality of long-term unemployment for increasing numbers of 18 to 25 year olds in Britain. Indeed, this age-group constitutes the fastest growing category of the long-term unemployed. For both men and women, the extension of the state's Youth Training Scheme into the Job Training Scheme for adults is unlikely to prove anything more than an interlude from the dole, a statistical palliative and a shifting around of unemployment within the population. A coherent <u>educational</u> response - as opposed to a <u>training</u> response - has yet to be forthcoming.

Higher and further education, themselves under considerable financial and political pressure, may be ill-placed in Great Britain to make such a response. Inasmuch as the problem is not going to go away, they may yet have to, however. In which case it would be better for us to start thinking about it now, rather than later.

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